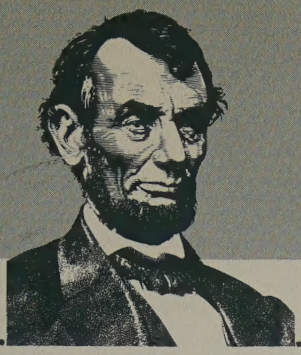

Lincoln Lore

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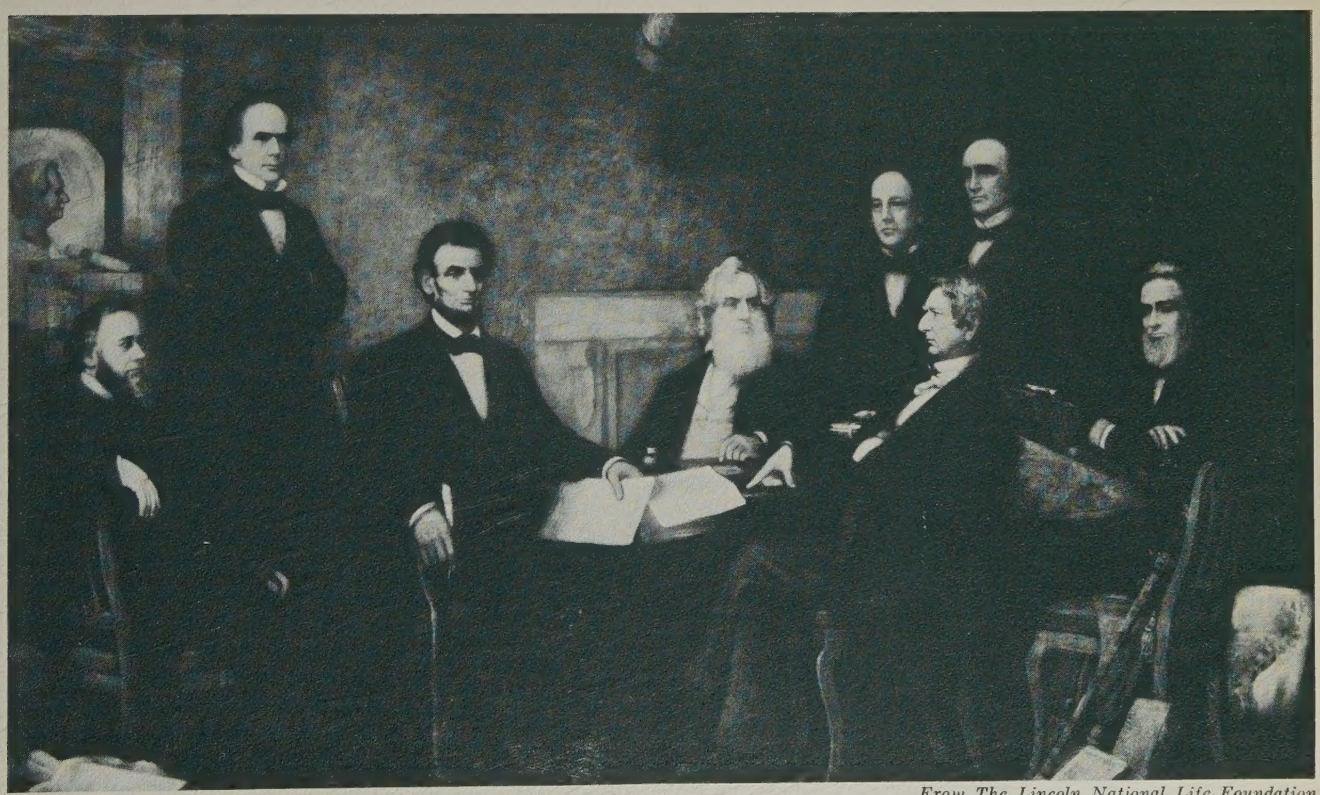
Carpenter's Painting: "The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation Before the Cabinet"

Some authorities have claimed that Francis Bicknell Carpenter's painting, "The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation Before the Cabinet" was a great piece of political propaganda. Such a painting it was said had presidential campaign possibilities worth a million vote-getting words. These historians professed to see that Carpenter's painting persuaded the abolitionist, who was always suspicious of Lincoln's moderation, to vote for him for re-election in 1864. Then, too, it has been asserted that the oil portrait made no campaign promises and that it made the masses of Europe feel "a new exaltation" in their own sufferings for freedom's sake.

These contentions may have no basis of fact. However, the painting was conceived and executed in the spring and summer of 1864 and Lincoln the Emancipator transfixed on canvas must have influenced some voters when they gave their verdict at the polls.

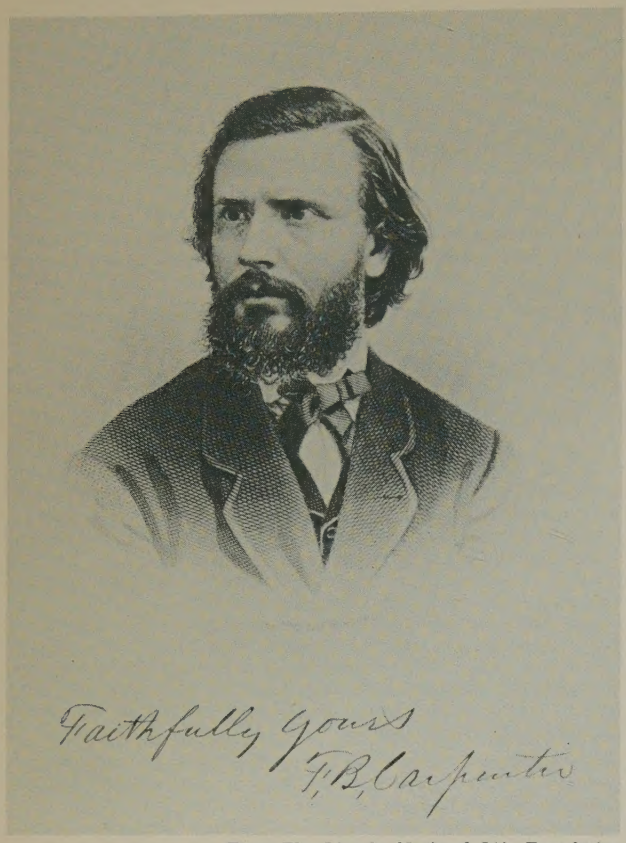
Aside from the political implications, the idea of such a painting was Carpenter's original "cherished project." For some weeks after the end of the year 1863, Carpenter had "brooded silently" over his design of a painting to commemorate the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation even to the point of executing rough pencil sketches. Prior to his visit to the White House, Carpenter had no knowledge of the facts or the details of the historic occasion he hoped to capture on canvas. Once he was commissioned to do the work he had to reverse his sketches placing Lincoln at the other end of the table and giving particular emphasis to room, furniture and accessories.

To implement this dream into the form of reality Carpenter obtained an introduction to President Lincoln through Samuel Sinclair, of the *New York Tribune.* Carpenter suggested that Sinclair contact Schuyler Colfax and Owen Lovejoy, who in turn could influence their



From The Lincoln National Life Foundation

Photograph of the original painting by Francis Bicknell Carpenter which is now entitled, "The Proclamation of Emancipation." This painting hangs in the old Supreme Court Chamber in the United States Capitol. This photograph is used with the approval of The Architect of the Capitol.



From The Lincoln National Life Foundation

Francis Bicknell Carpenter
Engraving by A. H. Ritchie
1830 - 1900

Carpenter's reputation as an artist was established after the completion of a full length portrait of President Millard Fillmore. A list of his sitters included many literary figures, clergymen and statesmen, among them four presidents of the United States. Carpenter's patriotism and humanitarian sympathies were best expressed in his historical painting of Lincoln reading the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation. A by-product of his association with President Lincoln and his cabinet was his book "Six Months At The White House" (1866) which in later editions was misnamed "The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln" (1867). The book has been described as one of "artless charm" and has considerable value because of its direct testimony. This engraving was made from a Carpenter self-portrait.

personal and political friend the president. The scheme succeeded as Mr. Sinclair went to Washington and with Mr. Colfax visited the president and gained his assent.

Meanwhile Owen Lovejoy, though critically ill (died March 25, 1864), was interested in the production of Carpenter's proposed life-size painting and he called at Carpenter's New York studio the last day of the year 1863. The dying abolitionist requested Carpenter to put into writing just what he intended to depict in the painting. Carpenter wrote Lovejoy on January 5, 1864:

"According to your request at my studio on Thursday last, I will briefly state in writing the purpose I have in view in visiting Washington.

"It is to paint a picture of one of the greatest subjects for a historical picture ever presented to an artist. *'President Lincoln reading the Proclamation of Emancipation to his cabinet,'* previous to its publication. I have been studying upon the design for the picture for some weeks and I never felt a stronger conviction or assurance of success in any undertaking in my life!

"I propose to paint the group life size. The canvas will be about ten feet high by sixteen in length. The figures will be grouped around the table in the President's apartment,—the accessories to be as literal as possible.

"I have chosen a moment when a suggestion or criticism is being offered (I had fixed upon *Mr. Seward* as the one most likely to take the lead) which gives occasion for the President to lift his eyes from the manuscript which he holds in one hand directing his attention to *Mr. Seward.* Opposite the *President* will be *Mr. Chase* and the others in various attitudes, some sitting and some standing will be grouped about the table.

"The arrangement of the figures is I think natural, the parts are well balanced, the interests centering as it would in the person of *Mr. Lincoln* and I think it will make one of the most interesting picture of this or any other age!

"Certainly there has been no such subject for a historical picture since the Declaration of Independence!

"I wish to paint this picture *now* while all the actors in the scene are living and while they are still in the discharge of the duties of their several high offices.—I wish to make it the *standard* authority for the portrait of each and all especially *Mr. Lincoln* as it is the great act of his life by which he will be remembered and honored through all generations!

"Most historical pictures (so called) are merely the fancy pieces of their authors. Ruskin the great modern thinker and writer on art says that the *portrait* is the only *true* historical picture! It is my wish to make the individual portrait as perfect as possible. I shall certainly carry enthusiasm for my subject and a large experience in the study of the human face to my work.

"What I especially wish is the facilities which can only be afforded me at the "White House" for the painting of the picture. I have three times visited the Presidential Mansion to paint the portraits of its distinguished occupants. The first time during Mr. Fillmore's administration and twice while Gen. Pierce was President. The last time to paint a second portrait of President Pierce and also several members of his cabinet. The room I occupied was the large one directly across the passage from the President's office. Being so near I used to see the President much oftener than I otherwise should have done though frequently but for a few moments at a time.

"That is the room I would like of all others, and if its use can be dispensed with for the time I shall require it (I calculate six weeks or two months). I shall be enabled to prosecute my undertaking (shall I not say great undertaking) to the best possible advantage!

"The painting when completed will be exhibited in all the leading cities of the loyal states. At least such is my purpose. A steel engraving in the highest style will be made in England from a small copy I shall make of the large picture.

"With the enthusiasm of the masses for the Proclamation I cannot doubt the success of the picture and I trust it will help to knit still more closely its illustrious author to the popular heart. It is important that I should commence the work as *soon* as the convenience of the President will permit. After the 15 or 20th of this month I hope to be at liberty to devote myself entirely to it.

"Will you have the kindness my dear sir, to lay this note before the President and may I not hope soon to receive confirmation of his *verbal* consent to the undertaking (given to my friend Mr. Colfax, and Sinclair of this city)—in a note from him addressed to me 653 Broadway N. Y.!"

Carpenter went to Washington the first week in February, 1864 and on the 5th he called on Mr. Lovejoy in his boarding house on Fifteenth Street. Sitting up in bed the dying man wrote a note of introduction for Carpenter to present to Lincoln.

The artist's first interview with Lincoln took place on Saturday afternoon February 6, 1864 at a public White House reception. Lovejoy had already made arrangements with the president and Mrs. Lincoln for the use of the State Dining Room of the Executive Mansion to be placed

at the disposal of Carpenter. Upon meeting Carpenter, Lincoln said, "O! Yes, I know—this is the painter. Do you think, Mr. Carpenter, that you could make a handsome picture of me?" After the reception was over Carpenter was invited into the president's office. After reading Lovejoy's introduction Lincoln said, "Well Mr. Carpenter, we will turn you loose here . . . and try to give you a good chance to work out your idea."

All the necessary machinery had been set into motion for the execution of the painting except that Carpenter needed financial assistance. This need was met by Attorney Frederick A. Lane who instructed Carpenter to "draw upon me for whatever funds you will require to the end." Lane admonished Carpenter to "take plenty of time. Make it the great work of your life."

On February 9th, Lincoln conferred with Carpenter in the White House study as to what he would expect of his subjects and as to what facilities he would need. Carpenter suggested that the president accompany him to Mathew B. Brady's studio where several photographs could be taken. With Lincoln's consent Carpenter made an appointment for 3:00 p.m. the same day. Several photographs were taken, including the one (Meserve 85) later used on the $5.00 bill. Cabinet members were also photographed in Brady's studio for use by the artist and Gideon Welles wrote in his diary on Wednesday, February 17, 1864, "went this A. M. to Brady's rooms with Mr. Carpenter to have a photograph taken." As to the other members of the cabinet one authority has written that "Stanton arrived, irritable from a heavy cold; Seward stomped in, the tip of his bony nose ruby-red from the chill winds; Justice Chase sat for his portrait, and one morning Carpenter called for Justice Smith at his home and they went to Brady's where Carpenter 'got a good study. " As is well known no photographs have been discovered of Lincoln with any members of his cabinet, although it has been said that the president was on one occasion photographed with his Secretary of State, William H. Seward. Perhaps if such a photograph was made it was the result of a suggestion by Carpenter.

Carpenter's letter to his friend Parker, dated February 21, 1864 gives an informal glance at his enthusiasm in the "venture" and of his plans respecting it:

"Yours of the 16th inst was forwarded to me from New York and reached me only this morning and I hasten to reply.

"You may be surprised to know that I am *here*, but it is even so, and on no less an errand than the painting of the president and cabinet in council,—'The Reading of the Proclamation of Emancipation to the Cabinet.'

"The group is to be *life size* and promises well. President Lincoln upon hearing of my design, very kindly offered me the facilities of the 'White House,. to carry it into successful execution. I have been here a little over two weeks, and already have studies well under way of the President, Mr. Chase, Seward, Blair, and Welles. I propose to have the picture exhibited when completed in the leading cities and engraved in England in the highest style of line engraving.

"I am sanguine of making a successful *venture* all around. It is my own conception from the start and so far carried out with the aid of only two or three friends. One gentleman very generously offered me all the money necessary to carry it through etc., etc. God has blessed me in it thus far and I desire to give *Him* all the glory of the success should this be granted to me!"

As early as March 2nd Lincoln began sitting for the Carpenter painting. A calendar of the president's contacts with the artist and his painting follows:

"*March 25, 1864:* Lincoln in his study all evening with Carpenter. Talks Shakespeare. Recites poem, 'Oh! why should the spirit of mortal be proud.'

"*April 7, 1864:* Lincoln interviews George Thompson (English anti-slavery orator) and party on subject of emancipation, then conducts them to state dining room to see painting by F. B. Carpenter.

"*April 20, 1864:* President poses in White House office for photographs requested by F. B. Carpenter.

"*April 25, 1864:* In the evening Governor Curtin (Pa.) visits White House. Lincoln discusses F. B. Carpenter's painting with him.

"*April 26, 1864:* Photographers from M. B. Brady's studio work in White House to make stereoscopic studies of Lincoln in his office for Carpenter.

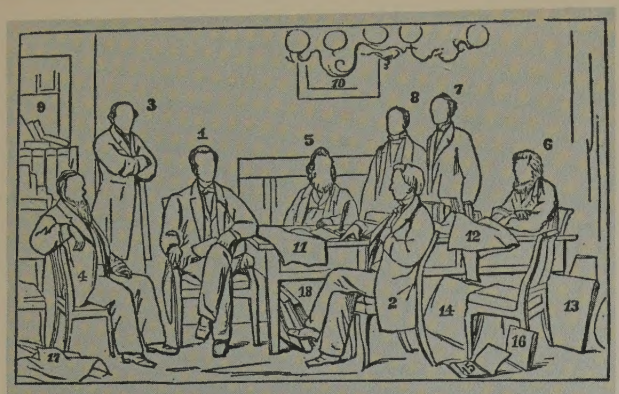
"*July 8, 1864:* In evening discusses Baltimore Convention with F. B. Carpenter and John Hay.

"*July 22, 1864:* President and Cabinet view F. B. Carpenter's unfinished painting of Lincoln reading Emancipation Proclamation to Cabinet."

Carpenter once made the statement that "I had no more right to depart from facts, than does a historian" and his use of photographs indicate his serious effort to depict his subjects as faithfully as possible. Stefan Lorant discovered two photographs of Lincoln (Lorant

From The Lincoln National Life Foundation

Carpenter's Emancipation Proclamation painting in a transitional stage.



KEY TO THE PICTURE

THE MEN

1. President Lincoln.
2. William H. Seward, Secretary of State.
3. Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of Treasury.
4. Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War.
5. Gideon Welles, Secretary of Navy.
6. Edward Bates, Attorney-General.
7. Montgomery Blair, Postmaster-General.
8. Caleb B. Smith, Secretary of Interior.

The room is the Official Chamber of the White House, in which all Cabinet meetings are held, and in which the President receives calls upon official business.

ACCESSORIES

9. Photograph of Simon Cameron, Ex-Sec. War.
10. Portrait of Andrew Jackson.
11. Parchment Copy of the Constitution.
12. Map of Seat of War in Virginia.
13. Map showing Slave Population in gradu light and shade.
14. War Department Portfolio.
15. Story's "Commentaries on the Constitution."
16. Whiting's "War Powers of the President."
17. New York *Tribune*.
18. Two volumes *Congressional Globe*.

From The Lincoln National Life Foundation

A rough penciled draft of this key made by Carpenter appears in Stefan Lorant's book "Lincoln—A Picture Story of His Life," Harper & Brothers, New York, 1957,

72 & 73, April 20, 1864) that Carpenter retained which he undoubtedly used in the execution of his painting. Mr. Lorant in his pictorial work "Lincoln—A Picture Story of His Life," Harper & Brothers, New York, 1957, pointed out that one of the photographs (No. 73) depicting Lincoln's head cropped from its body and background was probably placed over a painted sketch to study the artistic effect of Carpenter's efforts. Two other photographs taken by A. Berger, who was for a time the manager of Brady's Washington gallery, reveal Mr. Lincoln sitting in a chair in almost the identical position, as that depicted in the large canvas. The legs in the white trousers of the man sitting in the position to be occupied in the painting by Seward are those of John G. Nicolay. The indistinct legs in dark trousers shown on Lincoln's right are those of Carpenter.

Carpenter in explaining the general arrangement of the cabinet members and their relation to the president in the painting made the following comments:

"There was a curious mingling of fact and allegory in my mind, as I assigned to each his place on the canvas. There were two elements in the Cabinet, the radical and the conservative. Mr. Lincoln was placed at the head of the official table, between two groups, nearest that representing the radical, but the uniting point of both. The chief powers of a government are War and Finance: the ministers of these were at his right,—the Secretary of War, symbolizing the great struggle, in the immediate foreground; the Secretary of the Treasury, actively supporting the new policy, standing by the President's side. The Army being the right hand, the Navy may very properly be styled the left hand of the government. The place for the Secretary of the Navy seemed, therefore, very naturally to be on Mr. Lincoln left, at the rear of the table. To the Secretary of State, as the great expounder of the principles of the Republican party, the profound and sagacious statesman, would the attention of all at such a time be given. Entitled to precedence in discussion by his position in the Cabinet, he would necessarily form one of the central figures of the group. The four chief officers of the government were thus brought, in accordance with their relations to the Administration, nearest the person of the President, who, with the manuscript proclamation in hand, which he had just read, was represented leaning forward, listening to, and intently considering the views presented by the Secretary of State. The Attorney-General, absorbed in the constitutional questions involved, with folded arms, was placed at the foot of the table opposite the President. The Secretary of the Interior and the Postmaster-General, occupying the less conspicuous positions of the Cabinet, seemed to take their proper places in the background of the picture."

The painting of the picture required about six months (February—August). This was an exciting period in Carpenter's life and in 1866 Hurd and Houghton of New York published his book entitled, "Six Months At The White House With Abraham Lincoln. The Story of a Picture." The book has appeared in sixteen different editions; the last edition bearing the date 1883. Later editions bear the title "The Inner Life of Lincoln." The book is important in the study of the more intimate details of the life of the Lincoln family with some important information pertaining to the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation (see *Lincoln Lore*, No. 700, September 7, 1942. "Francis Bicknell Carpenter, 1830-1900").

The painting was completed "at the end of a half year." Undoubtedly it was near completion on July 22nd when the president and the cabinet adjourned to the temporary studio to hold "a formal critical session upon the great picture." On this occasion Lincoln praised the work and his comments "could not but have offered the deepest gratification to any artist." However, two days before the picture was to be moved for exhibition to the public in the East Room of the White House, Lincoln made one criticism. He suggested to Carpenter that the color of the binding of the book, Whiting's "War Powers of the President" be changed from that of the usual law book. Lincoln's parting words regarding the painting were, "Carpenter, I believe I am about as glad over the success of this work as you are."

The finished canvas was fourteen feet six inches long and nine feet in height. The frame was so constructed that each end folded in toward the center making its actual shipping size about eight feet by nine feet. Creasing of the original painting was prevented in some degree by laying covered rollers within the canvas at each folding place. Once the painting was packed and boxed its safety in shipping was assured.

The painting was exhibited in the rotunda of the United States Capitol, in New York, Boston and many other eastern and western cities. In Chicago and Milwaukee the picture was placed on exhibit for the benefit of the Sanitary Commission. Of course the renomination, reelection and reinauguration of Lincoln for a second term created a timely interest in Carpenter's painting. The painting was on exhibition at Pittsburgh at the time of Lincoln's assassination. The *Pittsburgh Commercial* for April 12, 1865 under the heading of "Carpenter's Great Painting" carried the following news item: "The 'Emancipation Proclamation' will remain at 64 Fifth Street, for this week only. Open day and evening". Then for about a year, from September, 1865, the picture was stored in Carpenter's New York studio. However, before putting it away for an indefinite period, the artist retouched and cleaned the picture in the summer of 1866 and placed it on exhibit in his native town of Homer, New York, for a period of two weeks.

Shortely after the completion of the painting the celebrated engraver Alexander Hay Ritchie of New York City was commissioned to reproduce it upon steel in "the highest style of the art". To state that the engraving was to be executed in Mr. Ritchie's best style was equivalent to saying that it would be as fine an engraving as could be produced in America. To facilitate this effort Carpenter painted a small copy of the large painting—the exact size of the proposed engraving, twenty-one by thirty-two inches. Whether or not the small painting was identical to the original is a matter of conjecture. There is a possibility that Carpenter may have changed the artistic concept of the original painting after the Ritchie engraving was published.

(To Be Continued in September Issue)